

SUSTAINABILITY OF SPORT IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA: CONCEPTUALISING A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS AND DECISION MAKING

Melissa Johnson Morgan
Jane Summers

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of a conceptual sport sustainability framework for regional local government in Australia. The framework will ensure that sport development investments by regional government decision-makers meet the requirements of sustainability and best serve the complex needs of stakeholders in community sport development. Issues associated with funding for sport development in Australia are discussed and the challenges associated with administering government funding at the regional level are identified.

Keywords: sport, sustainability, government, funding.

INTRODUCTION

Sport has long been acknowledged as an important vehicle to deliver community engagement and renewal due to its wide popularity and inherent properties related to health, fitness and social inclusion. A history of Commonwealth Government funding in Australia has supported a national obsession with sport and recreation, but has arguably created an unsustainable sport industry characterised by wide fragmentation of sport offerings, over-inflated consumer expectations and mismanagement of sporting organisations. As a nation, Australia values the Olympic medal count as a measure of sporting success, but gives no comparable value to measuring community sport participation.

This paper will provide theoretical evidence of the need for a sustainability framework to aid local government decision makers in their investment in sport development for their regions. An overview of the issues related to Australian sport funding and investment highlight the need to provide a framework for decisions relating to sport investment and development, which is ideally aligned with sustainability principles. Previous research on sustainability and community based programs is reviews and a conceptual framework for analysis of sustainable sport development is proposed.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING OF SPORT

Government funding for sport in Australia has reached a record high. However the Government's biggest ever injection of funds to Australian sport comes with an admission that there is a disconnect between grassroots and high performance sports where, '...it has become clear is that our approach to sport has stagnated over the last decade resulting in stunted participation rates, skyrocketing obesity numbers and an emerging decline in our international sporting performances' (Ellis 2010 <http://www.kateellis.com.au/newsroom/338/>).

Melissa Johnson Morgan (Melissa.Morgan@usq.edu.au) is a senior lecturer in the School of Management & Marketing, Faculty of Business and Law, University of Southern Queensland, Australia; Jane Summers (jane.summers@usq.edu.au) is the Associate Dean (Learning & Teaching), Faculty of Business & Law, University of Southern Queensland, Australia.

While addressing these issues at the state and national levels is encouraging, there remains a gaping hole in the landscape of sport management in Australia at the local government level. National government funding and accompanying policies have not addressed issues of sustainability in sport development, and have failed to provide a framework for decision-making when it comes to sport and recreation funding at the grassroots, regional community level. While the federal and state governments drive policy and funding decisions, local councils are often left to allocate money to many grassroots sports and sporting facilities and are ultimately responsible for the maintenance and ongoing provision of local sporting infrastructure. Across the three tiers of government, local governments are responsible for allocating 50% of all government monies assigned to sport, with state and territory governments controlling 40% and the federal government just 10% (Australian Government Independent Sport Panel 2009).

One of the most telling facts about the allocation of funds to sport in Australia is that there are very few facts available. There is no national register of total public expenditure on sport and recreation and so it is difficult to determine how or why funds are allocated as they are to particular sports. Proportionate spending on sport in Australia has also been blatantly biased towards Olympic sports which supports goals associated with elite sport performance but is poorly misaligned with the national health agenda. In 2009 the Government-appointed Independent Sport Panel reported that:

“The bias towards funding Olympic sports leads to outcomes that make little strategic sense for Australia. For example, more government funds are provided for archery than cricket which has more than 100 times the number of participants according to unpublished ASC data. Water polo receives as much high performance and Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) funding as golf, tennis and lawn bowls combined—even though these sports can rightly claim to be ‘whole of lifetime’ sports and significant contributors to the Australian Governments preventative health agenda.” (Australian Government Independent Sport Panel 2009, p.7)

In a bid to reduce the disconnect between elite and grassroots sports, the Australian Government released a national strategy for sport development and engagement in 2010 titled *Australian Sport: The Pathway to Success*. The goal of this unified strategy was to move to a collaborative, efficient and integrated national sport development model, with three key deliverables; 1) increasing the number of Australians participating in sport; 2) strengthening sporting pathways; and 3) striving for success at the elite level. However, the structure under which government funding for sport operates has had little reform and there continues to be a cyclical ebb and flow of funding based on election time promises and ad-hoc decision-making.

The national political agenda has entrusted sport with seemingly impossible tasks ranging from lowering the national obesity rate to bolstering trade through international exposure (Burbank, Andranovich, & Heying 2001; Chalip 2005; Ellis, 2010; O’Brien 2005). Local governments and communities are left the onerous task of managing the bulk of Australia’s publically funded sports budget and implementing and managing programs, with few consistencies within or between sports, and even within and between states and territories. Adding to the complexity of this situation are state and federal government mandates that local councils defend their investment decisions and report outcomes for sport development based on sustainability criteria (Lindsey 2008). Again, however, there is little consistency in

terms of prioritising sustainability criteria or aligning them with the national sports agenda objectives.

THE SUSTAINABILITY IMPERATIVE

Most definitions pertaining to sustainability are three-dimensional in nature and include economic, social and environmental responsibility. They refer to a path of socio-economic development that would be financially balanced, socially equitable, ethically responsible and adequately integrated in the long-term ecological balance of the natural environment. Sustainable development is also a dynamic process that continues to evolve and grow as lessons are learnt and ideas re-examined (Furrer 2002). This three-dimensional definition stems from the original concept of corporate social responsibility and the ‘triple bottom line’ approach to organisational management, which includes economic efficiency, environmental integrity and social equity.

While there have been substantial and lasting changes made to the way new stadiums and mega events are developed and managed, sport sustainability at the grassroots level has not enjoyed the same attention or effort in regard to setting agendas or investment solutions. However the threat of un-sustainability is forever looming over many local sporting organizations that rely heavily on local councils for both financial and managerial assistance. This is particularly true of regional sports and unfortunately regional councils are the least equipped when it comes to sustainable practice themselves (Dollery, Byrnes & Crase 2008).

One of the main problems faced by those looking to implement sustainable sport development policy is the lack of clarity around the terminology and a lack of theoretical frameworks to guide decision-making. Whilst there are substantial literature contributions available regarding the study of sustainability in relation to policy development and sustainable development generally, there is a vacuum when it comes to sport development (Lindsey 2008; Lawson 2005; Dowda et al. 2005; Kirk 2004). In addition, the ‘triple bottom line’ approach has not been central to the policy and practice of sport development, partially because of the reliance on public funding which insulates sporting organisations from real market forces.

The mandate to incorporate sustainability principles in local government infrastructure and investment provides a unique opportunity to reform sport at the local community level. Many local government decisions about funding sport are made without a strategic framework and fail to account for the complexity of stakeholder interests. Sustainability analysis usually always involves some form of stakeholder analysis which is then rationalised via economic, environmental and social sustainability measures. This type of analysis would offer local governments a starting point with which to organise and prioritise sports development strategies. Regional local governments in particular would be able to use sustainability principles to traverse the minefield of stakeholder disparity and set defensible agendas in relation to sport investments.

Lindsey’s work in this area (2008) proposed that any sustainable sport development process should consider the four forms of sustainability:

Individual Sustainability—the long-term changes in an individual’s attitudes, aptitude and/or behaviour through involvement with sport;

Community Sustainability—changes in the community in which the sports programme is delivered;

Organisational Sustainability—the maintenance or expansion of sports development programmes by the organisation responsible for their delivery; and
Institutional Sustainability—the longer term changes in policy, practice, economic and environmental conditions in the wider context of the sport.

Research on the sustainability of community based, government funded projects in other areas such as health, offer some insight into factors that should be considered in a regional sport planning. Shediak-Rishallah and Bone (1998) suggest that any analysis of the sustainability of community-based programmes should consider three factors:

- Project design and implementation factors—which include consideration of the negotiation processes involved in developmental funding, the effectiveness of the policy and processes surrounding funding decisions, the length of time available for the project to adequately address sustainability issues, the available financial capital for a project to achieve sustainable outcomes and the level of training available to develop human capital;
- The organisational setting—which includes the strength and level of business structure and skills of the organisations receiving funding, the extent to which the organisation receiving funding is able to integrate local government goals with organisational outcomes and the presence of organisational champions or leaders to drive success of any projects; and
- The broader community environment—which includes consideration of the impact of political, social and economic agendas of the broader community and other stakeholders and the degree of community participation and engagement of the project.

A sustainable sport development approach should therefore be one that manages the sport process and practices so that all stakeholders including profit based companies, government agencies and individuals are all contributing to the enhancement of human, natural and financial capital of their communities. The emphasis here is on providing regional councils (and other local government agencies) with an analysis and decision framework to help prioritise and allocate resources to regional sport and recreation programmes and facilities. Not only does a sustainability framework account for the complex and diverse nature of sport and sport stakeholders, but it helps to overcome the bias of agenda and short-term decision focus associated with agencies managed by elected politicians.

Lindsey's (2008) four forms of sustainability and Shediak-Rishallah and Bone's (1998) framework for assessing the sustainability of community based programmes can be synthesised into five key dimensions that would form the basis of sport sustainability analysis, and provide a starting point for a decision framework. These dimensions are:

- The Individual—including the demographic, psychographic and behavioural profile of the local residents and sports participants and spectators
- The Project or program—the characteristics of the proposed program, project or event and the infrastructure surrounding the project
- The Organisation—the characteristics and profile of the associated sports organisation(s)
- The Community—the profile and characteristics of the community including strategies or trends in other sectors that may impact on any of the other analysis

levels. Community should be considered at the immediate regional level and more conceptually in terms of national sports agenda goals.

- The Stakeholder Institutions—this includes the profile, characteristics, abilities and objectives of all other stakeholders including the government itself, the governing body(s) of the associated sport, industry partners and private sponsors.

Figure 1 shows that when these levels of analysis are combined with the three basic components of sustainable responsibility, a basic but useful framework for regional sport sustainability analysis emerges.

Figure 1: Framework for Sustainability Analysis in Regional Sport Planning

	Economic Sustainability	Environmental Sustainability	Social Sustainability
Individual			
Project			
Organisation			
Community			
Stakeholder Institutions			

Combining levels of analysis with the three components of sustainability would allow for the identification of key issues, which could then be prioritised and negotiated by decision makers and stakeholders. It is anticipated that analysis in some areas (for example, stakeholder institutional factors such as the national health agenda) would inform the priorities in other areas.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research in this area will apply the proposed conceptual analysis framework to an Australian regional local government sport and recreation investment and development process. The aim of future empirical work will be to see if the framework is able to embed principles of sustainability into the decision making process and prioritisation of resource allocation. The Toowoomba Regional Council and its 2010 ‘Regional Strategic Sport and Recreation Plan’ will be the focus of this applied research.

The Toowoomba Regional Council is a typical regional government body faced with increasing sport community demands and a lack of strategic continuity in managing resources. The Toowoomba Regional Council commissioned a study in 2010 to determine the sport and recreation needs and demands of individuals, sporting organisations and community groups in its region. While the report offers useful data on sport trends, facility requirements and details the complexity of the local sport landscape, it offers no criteria for prioritising actions or projects. Nor is it possible to discern if the Regional Council has any long-term and overarching guidelines directing investment in sport and recreation, and any subsequent assessment of that investment. The willingness of the Toowoomba Regional Council to engage with sport stakeholders but its apparent lack of strategic decision principles, make it an ideal case study for the application of the conceptual sustainable sport analysis framework.

CONCLUSION

Local governments struggle to understand and apply a sustainable sport development approach, and are faced with a number of structural challenges that impact their ability to consistently develop and apply the allocation of resources strategically. This paper focused on the development of a conceptual framework of sustainable sport analysis for local government decision-makers, as a tool to ensure that sport development investments meet the requirements of sustainability. Future research will apply this framework for analysis to a complex regional local government sport planning process. It is expected that the case research will provide a more sophisticated planning and analysis tool for wider application in regional governments.

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